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CHARLES BODUNDE (ED.)

Texts and Theories in Transition

*Black African Literature and
Imagined Tradition*



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Black African Literature and Imagined Traditions

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AFRICAN POETRY AND THE MASQUERADE TRADITION: A STUDY OF EZENWA-OHAETO'S *THE VOICE OF THE NIGHT MASQUERADE*

Binta Fatima Ibrahim

Introduction

Literary productions in Black Africa have shown that the oral traditions could be used imaginatively to produce texts, which have great aesthetic appeal even in the medium of the English language. Oratory materials like songs, heroic poetry, chants and other historical and verbal elements have been employed to enrich literary productions in Africa. The mask tradition is one huge arena of source-material for aesthetic reinvention. It is important to note that this tradition is only recently being deployed as materials of poetic production. The uniqueness of the masquerade tradition is demonstrated in the capacity to combine the performance traditions as well as the verbal art forms. These vital elements are noted by Ruth Finnegan (1968: 1):

Masquerades are masked figures in special costumes with some kind of enactments or representations of the ancestors with emphasis on music and dance. Masquerades are widespread in Africa. They are only recognized and differentiated through their costumes and various artistic artifacts.

Masquerades are of different types and they vary in performance pattern across regions and cultures. One example is the Yoruba *Agbegijo*, which displays carved wood objects and sketches. This masquerade is different in function and appearance from popular Yoruba masks such as *Egungun Eyo*, *Gelede*, *Epa* and *Eiyeba*. Adedeji (1981) gives a functional description of some of these masquerades in theatrical contexts: "the Lebe troupe was renowned for poetry (*ibi*) and dance; *Eiyeba* was popular for acrobatics and dance; *Agbegijo* was famous for sketches; and *Aiyelabola* for tableaux vivants". Within the Igbo cultural context, there are mask types such as *Ijele* and *Nmonwu*. In the Northern part of Nigeria, masquerades exist among non-moslem groups – the Bachama, Idoma, Waja, Tiv, Jukun, Geomai, Chamba and Afo. *Mumuye* ancestral masks are found in the Adamawa region of Nigeria. They perform during festivals to honour the deities for the rich agricultural yields of the year.

Among the Nupes in Nigeria, there are masquerade types like *Ndakogbaya*, *Ugu*, *Kuticva*, *Ehidingi* and *Gugwagi*. The *Ndakogbaya* is the only Nupe masquerade that performs during the dry season. The masquerade can be described as a tall figure with no head or limbs. The top of the mask is a round,

flat, plate-like object known as *Kanga*. It is made out of fresh broom strands. Part of the mystery surrounding this masquerade is its ability to expand, contract, shorten and lengthen itself at will. The dead (ancestors) whom the masquerades represent are to the Nupe people very much alive in the community memory. The mask is the link between Man and the spirit world to which the ancestors belong.

Oludare Olajubu (1978) observes that various masks represent varieties of cultural concepts, some leopard-like, some fish-like, bird-like and lion-like. They therefore take different forms in terms of their appearances, costumes, performances and patterns. However, they tend to serve the same functional basis all over. M.L. Abadom (1990) in "Artistic Heritage of Nigeria" adds that:

In the traditional belief, masks provide a forum for interactions between the gods, the living and the dead. These interactions result to and influence events that are of significance in the distribution and exercise of power and order. They are significantly used in adjudication; executing decisions; and burial rites as well as control of women, illness and crime. It is not surprising therefore that masks are fully utilized as emblems of powerful secret societies. For instance, the Ekine cult masks which represents life forms especially of animals such as the crocodile are found in the riverine environment (3).

As Romanus Egudu (1992: 31-32) observes, the mask tradition in the Igbo world exists in its gender and multifunctional dimensions. There are

Elderly male masquerades (who are usually the poet-chanters), adult male masquerades, teenage male masquerades (called *oliba* in some parts of Igboland), old female masquerades (called *nwaebune* in some places), and young female masquerades... These different types of masquerades perform different functions: Some are specialized in chanting, producing poetry; some run around pursuing young men and teenage males in a game situation; old female masquerades go from compound to compound inspecting them for cleanliness and destroying pots and other household utensils as punishment to the women of the homes for their failure to keep them clean; teenage male and young female masquerades entertain people with dancing.

Mask traditions are available as materials for deployment in modern African writing. One needs to emphasize that the literary intention behind Ezenwa-

Ohaeto's *The Voice of the Night Masquerade* is consistent with the on-going tradition of recreating oral traditions within the modern African literary context.

The Voice of Continuity

In *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*, Ohaeto uses the night masquerade as the agency for recovering and re-establishing the community voice and tradition. The poet presents the masquerade as a cultural body as well as an adaptive agency capable of accommodating the complexities of modern influences. To him, a distancing from the ancestral lineage may give a rather paradoxical doctrine, leading to a total conflict. In "A call at dusk", Ohaeto conveys collectivism in the grammatical index of the first person plural 'we' and the possessive pronoun 'our' to indicate the community will. He repeats these two pronouns well enough for the reader not to miss the ultimate intention. Take these stanzas for instance:

A the cross roads of our future
We convey our past memories
To sacrifice our present pains;

This is the crossroads
Spirits meet humans
Water meets the land
the child meets the adult

We come to the zones of power
We arrive at the powerful zones,
We send out the call here:
Where is he
Where is akataka
Akataka who wrestled with lion?

Ohaeto utilizes the ritual voice to establish the fact that society can be developed by alignment of resources rather than individualistic or fragmental approach to social mediation. The expression, "This is the crossroads" is symbolic. It alludes to the meeting point of the seemingly contradictory celestial and terrestrial forces. Of course, this problematic point is the defining moment at which interventional force is required. He ends the second stanza with the notion of the land and water claiming equal right of ownership. Also, the poet's reference to the contrast between the child and the adult is an indication of the venerated power of the ancestors represented in the image of the mask. The masquerade figure is the adult and the child is the intruder. The ancestral and ritual

significance of the chant are borne in the special way the poet manipulates the rhythm of the poem:

We send out the call again
 the drums call the sacred name
 the flutes sing the potent name
 Akataka! Akataka!
 Akataka! Akataka!
 Akataka who wrestled with lion!
 Do you know the identity
 Either alive or dead
 Do you know the identity
 the one who wrestled with lion?

The lines above reflect the poet's effort to reconcile the transposed verbal elements with the original source. The value of the rhythmic pattern is emphasized by Ray Benjamin (1976):

The masquerade has a characteristic rhythm, which is produced by a suitable and an intricate voice, instruments and stylized movements, and this rhythm supplies a compulsive force to the voice renditions... It also creates a dramatic link between the various elements of the masquerade, which is often in different parts of the village at the same time. (5)

No wonder then that the rhythm of masquerade's appearance is codified as earth – rumbling, tree shaking, leaves flinging and wind stirring phenomenon. This is very much like the Nupe Ndukogboya masquerade circumstance in which wind stirring (*dundufe*) is a ritualized phenomenon. In the second part of this poem titled "A call at dusk," the poet makes the 'anthole' the terminal point for the end of the fight. From this open end, the night masquerade responds to the people's call. The masquerade assumes the spirit form and is thus acknowledged in symbolic terms: 'ancient', 'birds', 'sacred' 'potent' and so on.

The masquerade voice in "The mouth of the night" is invocative. The repetition is a vital aesthetic form in invocation of the presence of the ancestors:

Night, companion and master
 Night, dictator and director
 Night the pages of memory
 Abeli di egwu!
 Oje na nmuo!
 The masquerade must go on!
 the masquerade must go on!
 slaughter of human lives
 Why do you desire life?

The poem bears imprints of ideas, values and conditions peculiar to the masquerade and the ancestors they represent. They are poetically canonized as the voice of social rhythm and cultural vision.

In "the spirit ties me to this earth" the poet envisages fear as he recalls the long memory of his birth. He refers to this fear as "an inward horror." He uses the spirit-medium to explain his circumstance, a circumstance of a feeling of 'a secret dread':

My voice is raised
Jumping over the valleys
Seeking solace from pain
My voice is raised

The poet is however calmed down by the existing spiritual force of his ancestors who are "Undivided by nebulous distinctions/seeing with a thousand eyes through stars of this night." In the ancestors, he finds confidence and hope. The spirits, he says "make honey from poisoned lips of life."

Ohaeto promotes national unity by recasting the spectrum of the masquerade drum accompaniments. In his list of Nigerian ritual drums he has the Yoruba *Sekele*, Igbo *Ogene* and the Hausa *Kakaki*. The poet dismisses the corruptive use of these agencies in modern day money-driven intentions:

The noise of gaudy advertisements
From the high rise apartments of lies,
The noisy lengths of phone awards
In the profusion of torrid titles
The rhythm of despair grinds on.

The land is very important to the poet. It is the material condition for production as well as the core of the people's spiritual perception. The poet needs the security and safety of the homeland for inner peace and harmony. As a chant, the poem "The chant is the escort" is enriched with elements of oral performance. The poet-chanter identifies with some natural phenomena, e.g. hill, mushrooms, ashes, moon, and attributes the qualities of these natural forms to himself. By choosing his images from the immediate landscape Ohaeto recreates the oral practice in which the poet seeks connection between art and ecology. Furthermore, the chant is a reinvention of the prelude format in oral poetry where the performer renders a preliminary chant at the beginning of an extended artistic undertaking.

We Mourn the Dead, We Praise the Living

Ohaeto interprets the bond between the living and the dead as a sacred relation. It is a bond of ancestral memory which must be sustained through the ritualized processes of chants and invocation. In the poem, "A dance of doddering deities" Ohaeto celebrates the dead in the form of apostrophe:

Babake! (our father)
Hear your oriki song Agu nwoke! (lion of man)
listen to your oriki
the python that owns the forest
the leopard that leaps at will
the panther that ever prowls.

You are eclipse
Blanketing the land's wealth
You are night
Enveloping the land's hopes
the channel of power
the burst of flash bulbs
the axe of people's will

Here again, the poet rekindles the memory of the masks by seeking images from the immediate landscape. Images of predatory animals and flora symbols reveal the sacred essence of the ancestor voice.

Conclusion

Ezenwa Ohaeto's *The Voice of the Night Masquerade* exemplifies the connection which exists between orality and the written tradition. This study reveals that the written product benefits immensely from the aesthetic appeal of borrowed indigenous forms. The masquerade chant imbues the written lines with special rhythmic pattern which enhances the sound of the poems. Most of the poems in Ohaeto's collection evoke a remarkable musical effect somewhat like the kind of cadences we find in Christopher Okigbo's *Path of Thunder*. Furthermore, the oral resources lift the written text from its seeming silence. Accompaniments such as songs, flute, drums and choral voices transform the poems into performance status with all its interactive agencies. At a period in which aesthetic production is fast growing as a means of contributing to global culture, oral influences create a canon of literature which is distinctively African in both subject and style.

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criticism of Africa's post-independence political and social development. The essays in this collection address the new political and social issues, they discuss the change of attitudes towards Africa and the new generation of writers and the new literary and critical approaches of educated African writers. They discuss the new literary and critical approaches to the perennial issue of ethnicity and the role of the writer in the new society.

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